DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 370 708 PS 022 413

AUTHOR	Pooley, Lynn, Ed.; Goetz, Kathy, Ed.
TITLE	Starting and Operating Support Groups: A Guide for Parents.
INSTITUTION	Family Resource Coalition, Chicago, IL.
SPONS AGENCY	Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE	[92]
CONTRACT	90-CJ-0960
NOTE	25p.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Group Discussion; *Group Dynamics; *Parent Associations; Parent Participation; *Parents; Social Agencies; *Social Support Groups
IDENTIFIERS	Group Development; *Group Leaders

ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed to encourage and assist parents in locating or starting a parent support group. It provides guidelines and suggestions for group formation and can serve as a resource guide for parent support groups. The eight sections of the booklet address the following topics: (1) the role of parent support groups; (2) definitions of a support group; (3) preliminary planning before starting a group; (4) getting started; (5) setting up the group; (6) the first meeting; (7) future meetings; and (8) the maintenance of a healthy group. Appendixes provide a list of parent support agencies, sample letters and handouts for meetings, a group formation checklist, and a resource directory. (MDM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 370 708

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Starting and Operating Support Groups

A Guide for Parents

PS 022413

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

P. Deane

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

Produced in conjunction with the American Self-Help Clearinghouse
by the
National Resource Center for Family Support Programs
Family Resource Coalition
200 S. Michigan Avenue Suite 1520
Chicago, Illinois 60604

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This guide is the result of the efforts of many individuals and organizations.

Thanks to Ed Madara of the American Self-Help Clearinghouse for helping to conceptualize it and frame its process. Ed insisted that a self-help guide for parents should contain insights from the parents who founded and run such groups. He also generously donated materials gleaned from years of working in the self-help business.

Thanks to Patty Wipfler from the Parents' Leadership Institute and to Judith Anderson, the Parent Group Coordinator for the North American Council on Adoptable Children, for permission to reprint materials.

Thanks to Judith Ashton from the New York State Citizens' Coalition for Children, Inc., for editing and reviewing an early draft of the manuscript.

Thanks to Mary James from National MOMS Club; Jane Honikman of Postpartum Education for Parents (PEP); Jane Bury from Postpartum Support Group; B.J. Pelayo, Tough Love's Regional Director; Jodie Gibbons, The Mothers' Center; A. Steenhuis of Tomkins County Foster Parents Association; and the other mothers and fathers who agreed to be interviewed and who responded to our surveys.

Lara Delaney, NRC's summer research associate and student of public policy at the University of Chicago, compiled all the information from various sources and put it into the form of a text. The guide was edited by Lynn Pooley and Kathy Goetz, copy-edited by Jonathan Wolf and Craig Hanoch, and designed by Kathy Goetz.

Finally, funding for this publication was made possible by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under grant 90-CJ-0960 for the National Resource Center for Family Support Programs. The Family Resource Coalition is grateful for their support for this project and their continued interest in programs which strengthen families.

What You'll Find in This Manual

This manual is designed to encourage and assist you in your efforts to start or locate a parent support group. It provides guidelines and suggestions for group formation and serves as a resource guide for parent support groups. The contents are organized into the following sections:

- What Parent Support Groups Can Provide
- What is a Support Group?
- Before You Begin
- Getting Started
- Setting Up Your Group
- The First Meeting
- Future Meetings
- Final Thoughts on Maintaining a Healthy Group

This manual also contains appendices with valuable resource materials:

- A complete guide on "Where to Find Parenting Support"
- Sample flyers
- Sample meeting handouts
- A Checklist
- A Resource Directory

In addition, suggestions from group founders and leaders can be found in the margin throughout the text.

What Parent Support Groups Can Provide

Nobody understands the challenges, frustrations, and joys of parenting better than other parents. And because of their shared experiences, parents are uniquely qualified to support and help each other in mutual-aid self-help groups, commonly called support groups. For parents interested in pooling their skills and ideas to help each other discover (or rediscover) the joys, the pitfalls, and the art of parenting, the development of a support group is an exciting opportunity.

"What do we most need to help us enjoy parenting?" and "How can we better nurture both our children and ourselves?" are questions that parents are addressing in hundreds of support groups across the country. These groups provide a comfortable and relaxed environment for parents discuss and focus on their parenting, their own personal development, and the support of their families.

What is a Support Group?

A support group (or self-help group) is simply a group of people with a common life situation or set of challenges, meeting together to help themselves by sharing their experiences, ideas, frustrations, successes, and hopes. Some of the benefits of parent support groups include:

- **Emotional Support**: Parents offer each other empathy, acceptance, encouragement, positive role models, and genuine concern and caring. They also give and receive understanding and appreciation for their efforts.
- **Information/Education**: Guest speakers, resource materials, and advice from peers contribute to enhancing parenting knowledge. Groups provide information about the growth and development of children, as well as information relating to parents' specific needs such as resources for parents of children with special needs, information about substance abuse for parents of adolescents, alternative education programs for teen parents, and childcare referral information.
- **Helping Others**: The opportunity to use one's experiences to help another person deal with the same or similar situation enhances a parent's self esteem. Additionally, recipients of help feel more empowered when they themselves have opportunities to reciprocate.
- **Socializing**: Friendships are forged in support groups. Parents also enjoy social activities such as potlucks, cultural events, holiday parties, and weekend retreats.
- **Advocacy**: Parent groups testify at congressional hearings on child welfare and family support issues. Groups can also belong to a national family advocacy organization called PARENT ACTION (See the Resource Directory at the end of this manual for contact information.) Attitudes, policies, and laws can be changed through education and advocacy efforts in order to promote understanding, gain needed resources, and strengthen families across America.

Comments from parents who have started a group or been group leaders appear in this space on following pages.

Before You Begin

"Contact someone who has been involved with starting a group and use him or her as an ongoing consultant."

Prior to planning a parent support group, you should first check to see whether there are already groups in your community that address your needs. Often, parents simply do not know how or where to find a suitable group or alternative resources.

On pages 13 - 16 of this guide, you'll find information that can help you locate family support resources in your community. For additional information, call the American Self-Help Clearinghouse, the National Self-Help Clearinghouse, the National Project for Self-Help and Public Health, or the National Project for Self-Help Groups. (See the Resource Directory at the end of this guide for contact information.)

Another important consideration as you explore the advantages of parent support groups is the critical distinction between the benefits that such groups provide, and those of professional counselors, therapy groups, and formal educational classes. Parent-led support groups are clearly not intended to substitute for intensive or individual professional therapy or substantial parenting education. Parents whose needs exceed the scope and capacity of a support group should respectfully be encouraged to seek assistance from the professional community.

If, after researching your community's resources, you decide to start a parent support group...Terrific! Planning and building an effective support group is an important and exciting project. It will be a challenge filled with rewards for yourself—as you learn new things and meet new people—for group members, and for your community. And it will be rewarding for you to be in a position to help parents gain deeper respect for themselves and for each other, as you gain even greater respect for yourself.

All you need to start or lead a group is a little bit of courage, a few guidelines, commitment, caring, and the determination to help yourself, your family, and others through mutual support and sharing.

"To recruit people to take on volunteer leadership roles in the group, I first generate a conversation based on similar interest, such as motherhood. Next, I explore her interests for: a) something she likes to do, b) something she thinks she's good at, and c) something she thinks she might like to do."

Getting Started

The challenge of starting a parent support group may seem overwhelming at first, but remember, *there is no single recipe for "making" a group*. Different issues, needs, and local resources require different approaches. The group will be a reflection of your individual creativity, commitment, and caring. However, we have listed below a few well-established guidelines.

• Self-Help Does Not Mean You Do It All Yourself.

Find a few other parents who share your interest in *helping to start* (not simply joining) a support group. When several people are involved in the initial tasks, they model for others at the first meeting what self-help is all about: not one person doing it alone, but a shared group effort. If you plan a small group of four to eight, a close friend to assist you may be all you need. For larger numbers, a core group or steering committee can share the work in getting the group off the ground.

The work you share might be co-chairing or helping to lead the meet-

ings, greeting people and introducing new members, calling members, bringing refreshments, publicizing the group, photocopying handouts, etc. It is important that this initial group, including yourself, not remain intact or entrenched for long, but instead hand over (or rotate) functions and responsibilities to other group members. Think "mutual help," rather than self-help.

Consider asking the help of any professionals who may be willing to assist you in your efforts. They may provide needed referrals and information, locate resources, and give suggestions.

"Get as many people to help as possible. Get good community backing or an organization to assist you and give initial support."

• Don't Reinvent the Wheel (Unless You Can Do It Better).

As you begin to plan your group, even if it is the first group of its kind in the world, you can best learn from other functioning support groups. Support groups exist for a variety of life situations including physical, emotional, economic, and social conditions. Call the self-help clearinghouses for information on a group near you.

At first, consider founding a local chapter of an existing organization, many of which provide technical assistance with chapter development. (See Resource Directory, National Council on Adoptive Children, for example.) Contact the local chapter of a national organization to inquire about the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of arrangement.

Visit one or two support groups to observe how they operate: consider organization, recruitment, discussion format, topics, etc. Borrow what you consider their best techniques to use in your own group. Adapt their flyers or handouts to suit your purposes.

"Our social work consultant was invaluable in helping our initial founders to work through differences and strive toward better communication, while learning how to personally and collectively deal with conflict in a healthy and confident way."

Setting Up Your Group

1. From Your Core Group, Designate a Contact Person.

The importance of the contact person's job cannot be overstated. This person will be the one whom people generally contact about the group. His or her phone number will appear in media announcements, on flyers and other public notices, including a listing with the American Self-Help Clearinghouse.

The primary functions of the contact person are:

- to make parents feel comfortable about coming to meetings
- to provide meeting information for interested parents
- to answer general questions about the group
- to make reminder phone calls to members about meetings.

This position may rotate, but not as frequently as other positions because resource materials (flyers, announcements) need to be updated to reflect the change.

"Don't start a group for others or because of others. It will drive you crazy trying to please everyone but yourself. Do it for you, and Just Do It!"

2. Find a Suitable Meeting Place and Time

"When looking for a suitable meeting place, include a place with childcare available."

The most immediate need for the group is a meeting place. When you look for a place, look for a permanent place. Consistency is vital when you hold any public meeting. Also consider:

- easy and safe access for all members;
- enough space;
- comfort;
- a setting where confidentiality can be maintained.

Try to obtain free meeting space at a local school, church, synagogue, library, community center, family resource center, hospital, or social service agency. If you anticipate a small group and feel comfortable with the idea, consider holding meetings in members' homes.

"Mondays are not good meeting nights because of competition with Monday Night Football. Think about popular TV shows when choosing a meeting day and time."

Choosing a meeting time should be based on the convenience of group members. Most parents prefer weeknights after the children are in bed, or right after church or temple service. It is also easier for parents to schedule and attend meetings if they are on the same day of the week or month, like the first Tuesday of the month.

3. Recruitment and Publicity

Recruiting group members is not usually easy, so you may want to start with a small group of friends. Your attitude of respect for each person is far more important to the success of the group than its size. Three or four parents getting together regularly can become a very effective resource group, and its success will attract others. Old-fashioned word-of-mouth is an excellent way to recruit.

We strongly recommend that you recruit parents by going to places that parents go: to nursery schools, daycare centers, play groups for parents of preschoolers. If you want to contact parents of children with special needs, visit schools and organizations that provide services to those families.

"To publicize your group, find out if there are any editors or writers for a local newspaper who are mothers. Approach them about a feature article."

Publicizing the group, on the other hand, is easier than recruiting. The purpose of publicity is to notify parents about the existence of the group and to keep them informed of meetings. Be sure to include in all announcements and flyers: a name, phone number, times to call, location of first meeting, an estimated starting time, and the primary goal of the group. The following examples from flyers suggest the diversity of parent support group goals:

- To help you understand your adolescent and learn the art of negotiation;
- To learn how to advocate for your special needs child;
- To provide educational and social activities for adoptive families.

(Appendix A is an example of a flyer provided by the Parents' Leadership Institute.)

Possibilities for the distribution of flyers include: community buildings, schools, day-care centers, religious meeting places, hospitals, recreational centers, post offices, and libraries. Community businesses like grocery stores and laundromats sometimes have a bulletin board. Be sure to keep your target parents in mind when you consider where to publicize.

You might also ask religious communities and other organizations to publish a small notice in their bulletins or newsletters. Definitely notify your local reference librarians about your intentions to start a support group. Contact local helplines and other information and referral services so that they too can refer people to you.

Publicity should also include making contact with local newspapers and submitting regular meeting announcements. Many papers have sections specifically for community or self-help group listings. Some groups also use community bulletin board services or public announcements on local cable TV or radio stations.

"Invite professional resources to see how your group works and helps the community. Be sure they leave with several of your flyers."

The First Meeting

There is a lot of excitement leading up to the first meeting because of the work done in preparation, but you shouldn't be discouraged by a small turn-out. Remember that numbers are not the measure of success for a support group. Success is making it worthwhile for the people who come—including yourself.

The first meeting should be arranged to allow ample time for you to describe your interests and work, and for others to introduce themselves and share their feelings and concerns. There is, however, also a need to pull everyone together and focus the group on what's ahead. Be sure to reserve a few minutes for a discussion of future meeting topics and, if time allows, choose one and begin!

Although some variables are beyond your control, there are certain steps you can take to make the first meeting productive and successful.

"When beginning a group, take your time and get to know each other—share your motivations, needs, hopes, and dreams. Include everyone in the decision-making process."

Tips for a Successful First Meeting

1. Before your first public meeting, be sure the core group has discussed and reached a consensus on what the general purpose, goals, and membership of the group might be. Present those ideas clearly at this meeting, in writing if possible.The Parents Leadership Institute has found over the years that an effective parent support group will:

- Give parents time to think, plan, and problem-solve.
- Show parents dependable appreciation for their efforts and successes.
- Help parents remember that their struggles are not theirs alone.
- Help parents build supportive relationships and friendships.
- Give parents a safe place to express some of the tensions that burden them.
- Give parents a broader understanding of issues for parents of differing circumstance and background.

"Don't sit at tables because people lean on them, and they create barriers between folks."

"Lots of ideas are known to work well, but the needs and desires of the members of the group should come first."

2. It is always a good idea to have a few people at the meeting responsible for warmly welcoming and greeting new members.

3. Arrange sign-up sheets for addresses and phone numbers.

4. Refreshments should be provided before or after the meeting. An informal atmosphere allows members to socialize more easily.

5. Start and finish your meeting on time. Have an agenda and be prepared to follow it. Maintaining a structure is important to prevent the group from disbanding. But always be flexible enough to allow members to speak freely.

6. Be sure new members are given an opportunity to introduce themselves if they wish. Do not pressure anyone to say anything at the first meeting. Parents often share the names and ages of their children and may mention reasons for joining the group or suggest topics they would like to discuss.

"If pressing business doesn't get done, we sometimes hold a special (extra) meeting."

7. After presenting the goals and purposes of the group, be sure to solicit feedback from members and arrive at a consensus, if possible. You should also stress the services and goals of support groups in general in order to differentiate your group from traditional therapy groups or educational classes.

8. Set out guidelines (or "ground rules") and a format for the group. These should be discussed and agreed on by members. You might want to hand out to members the "Discussion Group Guidelines" on the following page or design your own based on the nature of the group. (Appendix B is the Parents' Leadership Institute's "Guidelines for Listening," and Appendix D comes from the Mothers' Center.)

Formats follow either a "discussion group" or a "speaker meeting" structure (or a combination of the two) based on the needs and wants of the group. Discussion groups are simply small groups of four to eight. If your group is larger than eight, you can break the group into smaller discussion groups for specified lengths of time. Speaker meetings are usually held once a month with larger groups and involve a professional or group member speaking on a specific topic with a discussion session to follow. These types of meetings are generally easy to arrange, tremendously helpful to the group, and generate renewed enthusiasm for members.

"We put a personal agenda before a business agenda at our meetings. We always open with a circle question designed to encourage members to talk about themselves."

9. Use this opportunity to get people involved and contributing. Discuss the different tasks that group maintenance requires: providing future refreshments, rotating leadership, etc. Involve as many people as possible to instill a sense of ownership and commitment in the group. Sign them up on paper, and emphasize the enjoyment of participation. You may also ask for contributions to cover the cost of photocopying, refreshments, phone calls, etc.

10. Decide on a time and place for future meetings.

11. Have someone take notes. Notes help to generate future topics and can be incorporated into a monthly newsletter.

Discussion Group Guidelines

Groups tend to run better if there is some structure. Rules should be agreed on by group members at the first meeting and procedures for changing the rules or introducing new ones should be discussed. The sample guidelines that follow are courtesy of the American Self-Help Clearinghouse.

1. We are a group of people gathered together. We share a common bond. We are here to help ourselves and others by sharing our concerns, our feelings, our strengths and our wisdom.

2. We maintain trust by respecting the confidentiality of our group, and we have the right to remain anonymous if we so choose.

3. Each of us avoids dominating the conversation, and we provide an opportunity for everyone to participate.

4. Our responsibilities to ourselves and to this group include giving thoughtful positive comments, asking questions, and getting statements clarified in order to understand and be understood.

5. Smoking is allowed upon consent of the group. Each smoker must contain the ashes and dispose of them at the end of the meeting.

6. We express our beliefs openly and honestly. We allow others to hold their own beliefs and to express them as well. We observe and respect the right to disagree.

7. Each of us is responsible for the success of this group. We raise concerns to meet our own needs and will allow others to do the same.

8. We will listen actively when someone is talking and not have side conversations.

9. Any additions to these guidelines should be suggested to and agreed on by the group now.

Other examples include:

- New members may join at any time (or, not after second session);
- Everyone should try to come to all sessions;
- Each person is asked to fill out an evaluation form at the end of each session;
- If we decide to serve snacks, we will sign up to alternate in bringing them;
- Call a member if you cannot attend a session.

"Rather than have the agenda set by a member, the group looks over the various items and decides as a group what items to tackle."

"To motivate members to take on volunteer roles, I always try to connect with them on a personal level, in a non-threatening way, before I bring up business. People like to feel cared about, needed, validated, and capable. They don't like feeling overwhelmed or forced. If they step into the work feeling good about their part, small or large, they will work together more easily, and more work will get done."

"If there's a conflict within the group, the best thing members can do is NOT to phone their 'allies' outside of meetings to vent their feelings. Rather, bring the feelings back to the group to deal with."

Future Meetings

Not surprisingly, you may not have covered everything at the first meeting, such as establishing ground rules, agreeing on a format, or possibly creating a special name for the group. The second meeting can wrap up any administrative loose ends, but be sure not to spend too much time on this and neglect discussions. Allotting time to group business in future meetings is necessary, but it should occupy a small fraction of your meeting time.

While attending to group business, try to avoid the pitfall of the core group becoming a clique—the core group should "wither away" once the group tasks are re-assigned or rotated. And as you may have additional parents joining at various stages, remember to regularly ask your new members about their needs, and what they think the group might do to meet those needs. The welcoming of new parents into the group is a process that continues beyond welcoming them at the door.

Other considerations for future meetings are:

"Don't make it YOUR group—it's everyone's group."

1. Discussion Topics

When choosing discussion topics and subject matter, you should consider three factors carefully:

a. the goals of the group;

b. the needs and interests of members;

c. the group leader's style and expertise.

"We developed a buddy system for new members of our group."

Content may range from material with specific instructional objectives to spontaneous, unstructured discussion. The best and most appropriate topics will always come from your members, but the following may interest some groups.

"What problems or difficulties related to parenting have I overcome and why?"

"What problems have I not yet succeeded in dealing with and why?"

"What is the most important role that parents play today?"

"In what ways do we as parents help our children the most?"

"What have I done or said to my child recently that has enabled me to improve our relationship?"

"It helps when a new member takes on a job for her to be paired with another new member so that they can learn together."

2. Activities

Meeting activities can be social and/or educational. Examples of educational activities include: discussions; guest lectures; reviews of articles, books, and newsletters; video viewing; and structured exercises. When

developing exercises suited to your group, you might consider the following categories: real or hypothetical problem situations, role plays, scripts or plays, and childhood recollections.

(There are many books and manuals for group guidance which can provide you with ideas and instructions. See the Resource Directory at the end.)

Social activities can include potluck dinners, family outings to special events, or a movie. Your group might also have an interest in participating in activities outside of meetings, e.g. a babysitting co-op, a phone network, a toy and book exchange, or joining with other organizations like the PTA. Distributing a group newsletter is another activity which bonds members together. The Mothers' Center suggests something called a "Birthing/ Healing Circle." A "circle" is organized for a member who has a new baby, a death in the family, severe illness, or other major crisis. The "circle friends" contact the member in need to offer support, meals, running errands, rocking the baby, caring for other children in the family, or just some adult company.

"Don't represent yourself as anything more than you are. You may be dealing with people who need more professional help than you are capable of."

"Expect ups and downs in attendance and members."

3. Use of professionals

Consider using professionals as advisors, consultants, and speakers to your group, and as sources of continued referrals. As advisors or consultants, professionals should primarily focus on group organization, identifying resources, building communication and leadership skills, developing programs for the group and problem-solving techniques.

Professionals have also been greatly instrumental to groups by helping them find meeting space; networking parent together; advising other professionals about the group; or even making a contribution toward group expenses. (Refer to the section "Where To Go To Find Parenting Support" to help you locate appropriate professionals in your community.)

"It takes time to get it right. Be flexible and always get input from group members."

Final Thoughts

Communication Skills and Dealing With Difficult People

In almost every group there is one person, or several people, who is difficult, or in some way disruptive to the group. Some common difficulties which arise in groups are: sidetracking of discussions, side conversations, or perhaps a crisis situation. The most common problem within groups is a person who monopolizes the time and attention of the rest of the group.

Over time, groups find ways to resolve some of their problems using techniques or strategies members have agreed on. It saves a lot of time and trouble if each group develops strategies either to remedy problematic situations or, better, to prevent them before they arise. One simple but effective problem-solving technique is the use of a discussion facilitator or a "floater." The facilitator takes responsibility for focusing discussions, redirecting conversations to include others, encouraging quiet members to participate, and recognizing problems and looking for possible solutions.

When a difficult situation arises, a leader or facilitator may try: univer-

"Keeping members informed of the constant changes and events taking place can be handled by a monthly newsletter (or update). Also, phone chains and regular meetings were helpful to us."

"Write a monthly newsletter devoted to families' successes."

"We had contact with a social worker from the beginning. She helped us learn how to deal with difficult group situations, women in crisis, and working together. She developed and implemented a training session for our group facilitators on group dynamics. She was a role model for facilitating and providing a non-judgmental attitude."

"Don't go overboard with group traditions or rituals. Keep it flexible or you'll get stale."

"Try not to let hierarchies develop within the group. Everyone's ideas are important."

salizing the situation, neutralizing the situation, providing information, postponing the discussion, talking privately with the parent, providing concrete help, giving a direct response, sharing his/her own feelings and concerns, setting a limit, or involving the group in deciding what to do. The leader may also privately suggest professional help.

A "floater" is used when the larger group breaks down into smaller discussion groups and one person is left to roam or "float," thereby remaining available to handle difficulties on a one-to-one basis. For example, if someone becomes emotionally overwhelmed, the floater can approach him or her and ask if they might like to discuss whatever is wrong privately. This approach is subtle and sensitive to the person experiencing difficulty.

If you are dealing with a particularly troublesome individual, the group leader or facilitator should consider the following questions: Are efforts made to deal with this person and make him/her feel a more accepted member, or is the member further scapegoated and pushed outside the group? Is the problem simply one of unpopular viewpoints that somehow threaten the rest of the group, or is the person really disruptive and perhaps unable to behave according to mutually-agreed-upon guidelines and ground rules?

The group leader or facilitator should be careful not to make value judgments, make fear-raising statements, be evasive, ignore difficult moments, or use negative body language. If a leader responds in a less than optimum way, the best thing is to admit the mistake and take steps to improve the situation.

Group Maintenance and Evaluation

Once you've accomplished the task of getting the group started, you then face the challenge of making the group thrive. The importance of not doing it alone has been emphasized throughout this manual. The more people who feel responsible for making the group work, the greater chance it has to succeed, and the less you have to do.

A key factor in making a group function effectively is being sensitive to group problems and attending to them before losing the interest of members. Part of being sensitive is setting aside time to explore ways in which the group is or is not meeting members' needs. Periodically, members should submit their evaluations of the group and spend some time discussing their concerns.

Probably the most obvious indicator that all is not well is poor attendance at meetings or a rapid turnover of people. Here are some reasons to consider for why meetings may not serve members as well as they could:

- Meetings are too negative: group has turned into a "complaint session," with little constructive support.
- Meetings are too boring: group only covers "old ground" or familiar format, not allowing for new members' input.
- Leadership is too domineering: the group does not belong to enough people.
- Leadership is ineffective: group seems out of control, and new members do not feel welcomed or noticed.

- The group feels exclusive: newcomers perceive cliques or subgroups within the larger group.
- Meetings feel shallow: the group doesn't get at underlying issues which concern its members, or does not give opportunities for meaningful personal sharing.
- Meetings feel threatening: members are frightened away by angry confrontations that don't seem to get resolved, or by disruptive members who are not dealt with well by the group.

Other questions to ask yourself are: Are confrontations made in a caring way so no one person ever feels ganged up on by the whole group? Does the leader take sides or remain neutral, ensuring that different perspectives get heard?

If the group subscribes to the principle of confidentiality (and almost all support groups do), then permeating every meeting should be an air of trust. How much is this the case? Does information "leak" out of the group? How are breaches of confidentiality handled?

Although it may seem that most of the group decision-making is related to the negative aspects of a group, this is not true. You should expect a group to have lulls and rough spots, which does not mean the group is ineffective. Important elements of a self-help group are the feelings of not being alone, personal satisfaction at helping others, and of hope in seeing what you can do in the future. In evaluating any group, it is important to weigh the negatives against the joy, the laughter, the friendship, the compassion, the genuine concern, and the mutual support of each member in the group.

Lastly, if you do start a parent support group, the American Self-Help Clearinghouse would be very interested in learning about it. They would be especially interested in seeing a copy of any flyer or other materials that you develop, and hearing about any new strategies, good books, or program ideas that you have identified. Also, the Clearinghouse would be glad to link you with founders of other parent support groups once you have started one, so you could exchange ideas, concerns, and program successes. In any case, correspondence can be sent to the attention of Ed Madara at the American Self-Help Clearinghouse.

We wish you the very best of success in all your efforts.

"If you discover that one or two people tend to monopolize the group time, divide the group into smaller and smaller groups so that each person has five or ten minutes to share if they want to."

"Don't plan too far into the future. And don't worry about needing to be totally organized before the meetings start—people enjoy the work of organizing and will feel more ownership of the group if they participate."

"Keep the meetings positive, on an up-beat, and use some humor."

WHERE TO GO TO FIND PARENTING SUPPORT

Reprinted and adapted with permission from *Crying Baby, Sleepless Nights: Why Your Baby is Crying and What You Can Do About It* by Sandy Jones, 1992. (Book can be ordered from Harvard Common Press, 535 Albany Street, Boston, MA 02118, 617/423-5803).

NAME OF AGENCY	WHERE TO LOOK	HELP AVAILABLE
AGENCIES WITH THE WORDS "FAMILY" OR "CHILD" IN THEIR NAMES, SUCH AS "FAMILY & CHILDREN'S SOCIETY"	In the Yellow Pages of your telephone directory under Social Service Organizations	May offer counseling services to families on a sliding scale based on income; may have referral services to help you locate appropriate services in your community.
CHILDHELP U.S.A.	Call the toll-free number: 1-800-422-4453	Offers crisis counseling, referrals, and literature on child abuse and prevention.
CHILDBIRTH EDUCATION ORGANIZATIONS	In the white pages under Childbirth Education Association, or contact the national headquarters to find nearest groups: International Childbirth Education Association P.O. Box 20048 Minneapolis, MN 55420 612/854-8660 Childbirth Without Pain Education Association 20134 Snowden Detroit, MI 48235-1170 313/341-3816 ASPO-Lamaze 1840 Wilson Blvd. Suite 204 Arlington, VA 22201 703/524-7802 American Academy of Husband Coached Childbirth P.O. Box 5224 Sherman Oaks, CA 91413 818/788-6662	In addition to offering childbirth preparation courses, many groups also offer postpartum parent support groups in their communities. They are also a valuable resource for locating parenting services, or pediatricians in your community.

NAME OF AGENCY	WHERE TO LOOK	HELP AVAILABLE
CHURCHES AND SYNAGOGUES	Under Churches in Yellow Pages.	Churches, church-related counseling services, and synagogues offer pastoral counseling, and may offer special support groups and services for families with babies and young children.
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES	In the Yellow Pages under Schools--Universities & Colleges (Academic). Ask for the Early Childhood Education or Family Studies Department.	May offer parent education programs or groups.
DEPRESSION AFTER DELIVERY	Write for information, sending a stamped self-addressed envelope to: P.O. Box 1282, Morrisville, PA 19067, or call 215/295-3994.	A national self-help support group organization with over 70 chapters in the U.S. Offers materials, a list of telephone contacts for mothers with postpartum depression across the U.S., and support groups for both mothers and fathers.
FAMILY SUPPORT CENTERS	Family support centers tend to be associated with community institutions: schools, hospitals, libraries, YMCAs, community centers. Also check with your local United Way for information.	Many states and cities have drop-in centers where parents can find support through education, informal counseling, group meetings, discussions on child-rearing topics, and family-centered activities.
HEAD START	The public schools or department of social services in your community may be able to help you in locating a Head Start Program. Also look in the white pages under Head Start Centers.	1,300 Head Start Programs around the nation offer programs for infants and young children from low-income families. Programs include education and support services for parents.
LA LECHE LEAGUE INTERNATIONAL (Pronounced "LAY-CHAY")	In the white pages of your telephone directory. Or contact the national headquarters: 9616 Minneapolis Ave., Franklin Park, IL 60131. Their toll-free number is 1-800-LALECHE.	Offers telephone guidance and local education and support meetings for breastfeeding mothers. Some cities sponsor couples' groups. The national organization will refer you to a local group. It offers educational materials on breastfeeding and child rearing.

WHERE TO GO TO FIND PARENTING SUPPORT

NAME OF AGENCY	WHERE TO LOOK	HELP AVAILABLE
MENTAL HEALTH AGENCIES	Under Mental Health Services in the Yellow Pages of your telephone directory.	They provide counseling, and referral to other agencies. (Community mental health centers are publicly supported and offer their services free or at low cost.)
MENTAL HEALTH ASSOCIATION	In the white pages of your telephone directory or contact the National Mental Health Association, 1021 Prince St., Alexandria, VA 22314-2971, 703/684-7722, for referral to one of over 600 local mental health associations.	A non-profit organization offering information and referral to those who call or write seeking sources for counseling and support.
OBSTETRIC AND PEDIATRIC DEPARTMENTS OF HOSPITALS AND BIRTH CENTERS	In the Yellow Pages under Hospitals and Birth Centers	Birth centers and obstetrical departments of hospitals may offer postpartum support groups. Some hospitals and family service organizations sponsor telephone "Warmlines" that offer parenting information and support.
PARENTING NEWSPAPERS	Distributed in grocery stores, drugstores, and retail stores in many metropolitan areas. Or you can contact Parenting Publications of America, 12715 Path Finder Lane, San Antonio, TX 78230; 512/492-9057 to locate the nearest newspaper in your state.	Parenting newspapers often carry announcements about children's activities, parent support activities, and specialized services for families in metropolitan areas.
PARENTS ANONYMOUS	In the white pages of your telephone directory. The toll-free number for the national Parents Anonymous organization for referral to your nearest group is 1-800-421-0353.	Local group may offer a telephone hotline for parents seeking a supportive counselor. May also sponsor support groups in your community for parents who have abused or are afraid of abusing their babies or children.

NAME OF AGENCY	WHERE TO LOOK	HELP AVAILABLE
PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITALS OR IN-PATIENT PSYCHIATRIC UNITS IN COMMUNITY HOSPITALS	In the Yellow Pages under Hospitals.	Offer hospitalization for mothers who suffer severe postpartum depression or psychosis or other emotional problems. Some hospitals also offer out-patient therapy and counseling groups for parents with emotional problems.
PSYCHOLOGISTS, PSYCHIATRISTS, AND SOCIAL WORKERS IN PRIVATE PRACTICE	In the Yellow Pages under Psychologists, Social Workers, or Physicians -- Psychiatry. Referrals from friends or other medical professionals are often helpful.	Offer individual and family counseling for a fee, sometimes on a sliding scale.
PUBLIC LIBRARY	In the telephone directory under government listings for your city or county.	The reference desk at your library may have directories of community services in your locale, including organizations and agencies that serve families and children.
SENIOR CENTERS	In the Yellow Pages under Senior Citizen's Service and Health Organizations	May aid you in locating an appropriate volunteer, "foster grandparent" to visit you and your family on a weekly or biweekly basis.
UNITED WAY	In the white pages of your telephone directory.	Funds social service organizations in your community and may be able to refer you to organizations offering family counseling or support. Many sponsor Infolines or First Call for Help--telephone referral services.
YMCA or YWCA	Under YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) or YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) in the white pages of your telephone directory.	Often offer parent support groups as part of their programming for families.

BUILDING PARENT SUPPORT

It's great to be a parent! Great to love our children more than we've ever loved anyone before! Great to play and laugh, snuggle and watch them explore their world with boundless energy. There's no love, no commitment quite like the caring that flows between us and our children. We are good mothers and fathers, and we want good lives for our children!

But parenting is a big job—most of us had no idea how completely our lives would change! We are required to learn continually, to restructure all our relationships, to be "on call" 'round the clock for years. We want to be wise, loving and patient with our children, whose needs are often confusing and sometimes overwhelming. All this, in addition to earning a living, managing a household, keeping our friends, eating, and sometimes sleeping! We work hard, care deeply, yet we seldom have the opportunity to feel satisfied with the job we are doing as mothers and fathers.

What do we most need to help us enjoy parenting? How can we better cherish both our children and ourselves? A Parent Resource Group can provide a place to begin focusing on our own parenting. It's a structured meeting of parents who listen and talk about the things that matter to us as mothers and fathers. As we get to know each other, we can develop:

- Understanding and appreciation for the tremendous job each of us does.
- A chance to learn from each other's struggles and successes.
- Reliable information about what our children need from us.
- Encouragement and skills with which to build more effective support for ourselves and our families.

Listening is the cornerstone skill which makes the group effective. As parents learn to listen well, the benefits spread to relationships within the family.

You are invited to join a parent resource group,

organized and led by:

which will meet:

address:

For more information, or to sign up for the group, call:

Hope to see you there!

(Sample flyer prepared by Parents' Leadership Institute, reprinted with permission.)

Appendix B

GUIDELINES FOR LISTENING

This parent resource group is designed to help you learn some new things about listening, and to make closer connections with other parents. In the group, the quality of listening each of us does will determine the effectiveness of our time together.

In normal conversations or in meetings, we usually act casually, jumping in to offer our comments whenever we think of something to say. We look for what we want to know, and comment on our thoughts about each topic of interest to us. This is fine and often necessary as we carry on our busy lives.

The listening you are encouraged to do here is different, however. **The idea is to listen in order to assist the parent who is talking.** Parents rarely have the chance to examine their thoughts and experience at their at their own pace. We spend our days filling the needs of others. We try to solve problems, but seldom have time to understand why our solutions succeed or fail. The parent resource group is set up to give parents precious time to think. We want to develop parents' trust in their own fine intelligence.

When you listen while a parent unfolds her thoughts, it will be your job to protect her from interruption, interpretation and judgement. With your attention, she will be able to examine her thinking more closely. She'll have the chance to sort through her experience without the usual worry and rush. As her listener, try to learn who she is and what she thinks and feels, putting aside what you are curious about or how your experience compares to hers. You will be free to talk about yourself in detail when she listens to you in turn. Here are some short guidelines to help you begin to listen as an assistant to a parent.

- **Adopt an attitude of full respect for yourself and for every member of the group.**
- **Assume that your listening, backed by your respect and caring, will be of key significance to other members of the group.**
- **Give your full attention to the person who is speaking. Do not interrupt.**
- **Do not offer advice. Instead, offer an attitude of trust in each person's ability to think, experiment and solve problems.**
- **Openly praise the good you see in yourself and in others.**
- **Keep the situations and feelings discussed in the group STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. Don't refer to what someone has said in the group when it's your turn to talk, at the close of the group, when you meet on a social occasion, or in conversations with others.**

(Prepared by Parents' Leadership Institute, reprinted with permission.)

CHECKLIST

- ☐ Check out the local parenting support resources available in your community.
- ☐ Call the national self-help clearinghouses for information about parent support groups located near you.
- ☐ Consider becoming a local chapter of a national organization and call to find out about membership benefits.
- ☐ Visit other self-help, or support groups in your community to see how they operate.
- ☐ Find a few other parents to assist you in starting a group.
- ☐ Ask the help of any professionals in your community.
- ☐ Designate a contact person.
- ☐ Choose a suitable meeting place and time.
- ☐ Design your flyers and announcements and then begin your publicity blitz and recruitment campaign.
- ☐ Plan your agenda for the first meeting with the core group and have your "guidelines" handouts ready.
- ☐ Choose a welcoming committee and buy name tags.
- ☐ Make sure sign-up sheets are on hand.
- ☐ Arrange for refreshments.
- ☐ Sign members up for future group tasks.
- ☐ In the immortal words of NIKE, "**JUST DO IT!**"

RESPONSIBILITIES OF GROUP MEMBERS TO THE GROUP

1. Each group member bears some of the responsibility for the group's success.

2. If a member cannot be present at any meeting of the group, she must let her facilitator know. Your facilitators are:

_____ Phone # _____

_____ Phone # _____

3. Members should be able to feel free to express their deepest concerns with the assumption that other group members will respect these and not share them with others. Of course, important issues brought up through the group experience can be discussed, but a members' anonymity should be safeguarded.

4. Because of time limitations, we try to keep the focus on our personal experiences, or on how the experiences of another has had a personal impact.

5. Each member's need for time to speak must be recognized and respected by the entire group. It is also recognized that group members have the right to be silent and not respond to every issue.

6. Each group member is asked to develop a non-judgmental attitude, by being empathic and supportive and by finding both the unique and the common feelings in another's situation.

(Adapted from materials by the Mothers' Center)

Books and Pamphlets

Braun, Linda A., Jennifer K. Coplon, Phyllis C. Sonnenschein; *Helping Parents in Groups* (Boston, MA: Resource Communications Inc.), 1984.

Powell, Thomas J., ed.; *Working with Self-Help* (Silver Spring, MD: National Association of Social Workers, Inc.), 1990.
Available from: NASW Press, Silver Spring, MD 20910

Lawson, Leslie G., Franklyn D. Donant, John D. Lawson; *Lead On! The Complete Handbook for Group Leaders* (San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers), 1982.

California Self-Help Center; *Help Yourself: Self-Help Mutual Support Group Resources Catalogue* (Los Angeles, CA: California Self-Help Center), 1985.Available from: California Self-Help Center, UCLA, 2349 Franz Hall, 405 Hilgard Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90024

Gartner, A., and Riessman, F.; *A Working Guide to Self-Help Groups* (New York, NY: New Viewpoint/Vision Books), 1979.
Available from: Vision Books, 790 Commercial Ave., Coos Bay, OR 97420.

Hill, K.; *Helping You Helps Me: A Guide Book for Self-Help Groups* (Ottawa, Canada: Canadian Council on Social Development), 1985.Available from: Canadian Council on Social Development, 55 Parkdale Ave., Box 3505, Station C, Ottawa, Canada, K1Y 4G1.

Madara, E.J. and Denville, A.M.; *The Self-Help Sourcebook: Finding and Forming Mutual Aid Self-Help Groups* (Denville, NJ: New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse), 1990 (3rd ed.).
Available from: The New Jersey Self-Help Clearinghouse, St. Clares-Riverside Medical Center, Pocono Road, Denville, NJ 07834.

Periodicals

The Mothers Resource Guide is a quarterly national magazine published by mothers dedicated to increasing communication and networking within the mothering community. It is a comprehensive directory of resources for today's mothers.

To subscribe, send $3.00 to:

Mothers Resource Guide
P.O. Box 38
South Milwaukee, WI 53172.

Self-Help Clearinghouse Directory

National listings

American Self-Help Clearinghouse
St. Clares-Riverside Medical Center
Denville, NJ 07834
201/625-7101
TDD 625-9053, FAX 625-8848

National Self-Help Clearinghouse
Graduate School and University Center of the City
25 West 43rd Street
Room 620
New York, NY 10036
212/624-2944

National Project for Self-Help and Public Health
310 Maple Avenue, West
Suite 182
Vienna, VA 22180

National Project for Self-Help Groups
George Mason University
Fairfax, VA 22030-4444
703/764-6750

For Individual States

California	1-800-222-LINK (in CA only)
Connecticut	203/789-7645
Illinois	708/328-0470
Iowa	1-800-383-4777 (in Iowa)
Kansas	1-800-445-0116 (in Kansas)
Massachusetts	413/545-2313
Michigan	1-800-752-5858 (in MI)
Minnesota	612/224-1133
Missouri	816/561-HELP or 314/773-1399
Nebraska	402/476-9668
New Jersey	1-800-FOR-M.A.S.H. (in NJ)
New York	
Long Island	516/348-3030
Westchester	914/347-3620
other	914/347-3620
N. Carolina	704/331-9500
Ohio	513/225-3004
Pennsylvania	
Pittsburgh	412/261-5363
Scranton	717/961-1234
Rhode Island	401/277-2231
S. Carolina	803/791-9227
Tennessee	615/584-6736
Texas	512/454-3706
Wash., D.C.	703/941-LINK

Selected Parenting Group Information

These organizations have publications, information on chapter development, and other resources available for support groups.

Stepfamily Association of America
215 Centennial Mall Dr.
Suite 212
Lincoln, NE 68508-1813
402/477-7837

Tough Love International (for parents of troubled teens)
Box 1069
Doylestown, PA 18901
215/348-7090

Parents Anonymous (for abusive parents or parents at-risk of abuse)
6733 S. Sepulveda Blvd.
Suite #270
Los Angeles, CA 90045
1-800-421-0353

North American Council on Adoptable Children
1821 University Avenue
Suite N-498
St. Paul, MN 55104
612/644-3036

Abused Parents of America
2873 Roosevelt Ave.
Kalamazoo, MI 49004

Parents Without Partners (for single parents)
8807 Colesville Road
Silver Spring, MD 20910
1-800-637-7974

Pilot Parent Partnerships (for parents of children with disabilities)
2150 East Highland #105
Phoenix, AZ 85016
602-468-3001

Postpartum Education for Parents
P.O. Box 6154
Santa Barbara, CA 93110
805/564-3888

Single Parent Resource Center
1165 Broadway
New York, NY 10001
212/947-0221

Parents Leadership Institute (for parenting workshops, classes, group leadership training, and resource materials)
P.O. Box 50492
Palo Alto, CA 94303
415/424-8687

Mothers Support Groups (National)

MOMS Club
814 Moffatt Circle
Simi Valley, CA 93065
805/526-2725

F.E.M.A.L.E.
P.O. Box 31
Elmhurst, IL 60126

Home By Choice
P.O. Box 103
Vienna, VA 22180

The Mother's Connection
50 Pintard Ave.
New Rochelle, NY 10801
914/235-WISH

National Association of Mothers' Centers
336 Fulton Ave.
Hempstead, NY 11550
1-800-645-3828

Additional Group Information

PARENT ACTION is a nonprofit national membership organization that advocates policies, programs, and services to support all families with children, and makes the public aware of what it takes to nurture and strengthen the family.
PARENT ACTION also helps parents make connections to programs, services, and other parents around the nation. For membership information, please write:

PARENT ACTION
2 Hopkins Plaza, Suite 2100
Baltimore, MD 21201

About the FRC

The Family Resource Coalition is the central source for leadership and information in the family support field. It develops resources for family support programs, provides information for formulating public policies, and documents activities and outcomes of current work in the field. Coalition services and activities include:

- consulting, technical assistance, and training services for programs, schools, and government;
- working in the public policy arena to communicate relevant issues and concerns of those in the family support field and to educate leaders about the principles, successes, and promises of the family support approach;
- providing leadership at the national level to plan strategy and the allocation of resources for continued growth of the field;
- publishing the *FRC Report*, a quarterly devoted to family support issues and the *FRC Connection*, a networking newsletter for Coalition members, and other manuals, monographs, and books for family support professionals.
- sponsoring a national conference on family support issues.

The National Resource Center for Family Support Programs, a division of the Family Resource Coalition, is charged with identifying and developing quality resource materials on programs. Further duties of the NRC are to:

- make available state-of-the-art knowledge on program design, administration, staffing, and financing;
- enhance information flow, networking, and collaboration among local programs;
- track federal, state, and local policy initiatives;
- link family support to other services for families and children;
- create a technical assistance network of experts and deliver technical assistance services.

Among the products being developed by the NRC are a computerized database and retrieval system, an annual inventory of state initiatives, bibliographies on major topics, technical assistance resource papers, and other publications.